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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the means by which an in-house evaluation for the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) was constructed to facilitate communication among different levels of the agency. The VDOT underwent a decentralization process, beginning in 1986, under the direction of a decentralization committee. In early 1989, a qualitative study consisting of interviews with administrators involved in the most basic geographic/administrative component of the agency, the "residency," was undertaken. Feedback was elicited from interviewees throughout the development of the report. Eight functions common to each residency unit were identified, and it was determined that the role of the administrative head of the unit was in transition from engineer to manager. Recommendations for management philosophy, management training, and resource needs assessment were developed to respond to this transition; and three task groups were established to deal with the three recommendations, respectively. In addition, subgroups were assigned to assessing the physical needs of individual residencies and personnel needs in the area of accounting, data management, and human resources. The processes and results of the study reveal the effectiveness of involving all levels of the organization in the evaluation process. (TJH)

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FACILITATING THE OPERATIONALIZATION OF EVALUATION RECOMMENDATIONS

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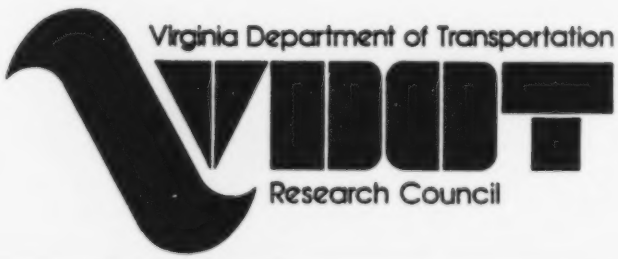

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FACILITATING THE OPERATIONALIZATION OF EVALUATION RECOMMENDATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

In many organizations, particularly those which have existed for some period of time, communication problems arise. Such problems can often be traced to the different perspectives that result from differences in the roles and responsibilities of its members. Evaluators must be constantly aware of such differences and take steps to ensure that representatives of these various organizational "sub-cultures" are involved in the evaluation process. This involvement should span all stages of the evaluation, from its initial conceptualization to the presentation of the results and the consideration of the recommendations. This paper describes how an in-house evaluation for a state agency was constructed to facilitate communication among different levels of the agency. We found that clarity in communication was particularly important in formulating the recommendations of the study.

BACKGROUND

The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) is the agency responsible for the construction and maintenance of the state's system of roadways. VDOT is organizaed around a central administration located in Richmond, the state capitol. The state is divided into 9 transportation districts, each managed by a district administrator. Each district is subdivided into 3 to 6 residency offices. Each of the 45 residencies

across the state is managed by a resident engineer who is responsible for the field operations of VDOT (e.g. road maintenance, supervising road construction).

In 1986, VDOT began to decentralize authority from the central administration to the district and residency levels. A Decentralization Committee was appointed by the Commissioner of Transportation and charged with the mission of determining the authorities and decision-making responsibilities appropriate for decentralization. The original committee was composed of the Commissioner, the Chief Engineer, 3 Directors, 3 District Administrators, 1 Division Administrator, and 1 Senior Research Scientist. The original committee decided that 2 resident engineers should be added for input from the field.

In the course of the Decentralization Committee's work, a larger group of resident engineers expressed concerns about the possible effects of decentralization on the existing residency organization. These resident engineers requested a study of the residency organization. After the decentralization recommendations were reviewed and approved, the committee members commissioned a full evaluation of the residencies' role in the agency. At this point, three additional resident engineers were appointed to the Decentralization Committee.

This study, "The Roles, Responsibilities, and Functions of the Office of the Residency," was completed in early 1989. The qualitative methodology of the study involved interviews with all 45 resident engineers and their staff, the 9 district administrators, and 6 central office administrators. The evaluators visited each residency for a 1 1/2- to

2-day period. During the visits, the evaluators had opportunities to observe residency operations and discuss a number of issues with the resident engineers. These issues focused on such questions as:

1. What are the functions common to each residency?
2. What are the residency functions that vary because of environmental factors?
3. What factors influence residency activities?
4. What are the projected changes in the future residency office and its environment?
5. What are the projected knowledge, skills, and abilities, and roles of the future resident engineer?
6. What additional resources will the future residency require in order to operate efficiently and effectively?

In addition to information gained through the observations and interviews, a program description of the residency organization was developed through a reiterative process. The resident engineers had the opportunity to respond to the evolving document throughout the study.

From the collective body of data, eight functions common to all residencies were identified. They were (1) accounting, (2) administration, (3) construction, (4) maintenance, (5) permits and subdivisions, (6) public relations, (7) legal, and (8) personnel. Functions unique to particular

residencies were identified and found to be related to five influences: (1) district policy, (2) geographic location, (3) urban/rural status, (4) availability of resources at the residency, and (5) the management style of the resident engineer.

Data from the interviews and observations revealed that the organizational role of the resident engineer was undergoing rapid changes, both internally and externally. Traditionally, the role of resident engineer had been defined as that of an engineer. However, this definition was being challenged by the current administration's emphasis on management. This change was causing stress for the resident engineers.

In order to facilitate this transition from engineer to manager, three broad recommendations were made based on the evaluation efforts. The recommendations were conceptual in nature and would provide the impetus for change in VDOT management, if implemented. The recommendations were:

1. To develop a statement of philosophy of management.
2. To develop long-range strategic management planning tools.
3. To provide resources for critical management support functions.

These recommendations were adopted for implementation by the Decentralization Committee. Before implementation could occur, however, it was necessary to further refine the recommendations and enfranchise those individuals affected by them. In order to engage all levels of management

and staff in interactive dialogue regarding the best methods for implementation, the Commissioner of Transportation appointed three task groups. Each group was charged with the responsibility of operationalizing one of the recommendations. Each of the task groups was comprised of representatives from all three levels of the organization, including the Commissioner of Transportation, the Deputy Commissioner, the Chief Engineer, division and district administrators, and staff. The continued participation of the evaluators was also seen as crucial because of their familiarity with the residency organization and the rapport they established with the field personnel during the study. The task groups and their areas of responsibility are illustrated in Figure 1.

As can be seen in Figure 1, each of the task groups was assigned to refine one of the recommendations. To accomplish this, they were to stimulate communication, bringing field staff and managers together to increase mutual awareness as they considered the problems addressed by the recommendations and the most appropriate means to implement them. Such an approach, in which an extensive dialogue is generated among the various levels of the organizational hierarchy, is not always used in large bureaucratic agencies. More typically, decisions are implemented after unilateral consideration by the top levels of management. The anticipated benefits of this broader involvement in the implementation decisions ranged from the creation of more realistic strategies to improved communication and heightened morale.

TASK GROUP 1

The efforts of the first task group were directed toward the development of a departmental philosophy of management for the resident

TASK GROUP STRUCTURE

TASK GROUP 1
DEVELOP PHILOSOPHY OF MANAGEMENT

TASK GROUP 2
DEVELOP MANAGEMENT TRAINING

TASK GROUP 3
EVALUATE RESOURCE NEEDS

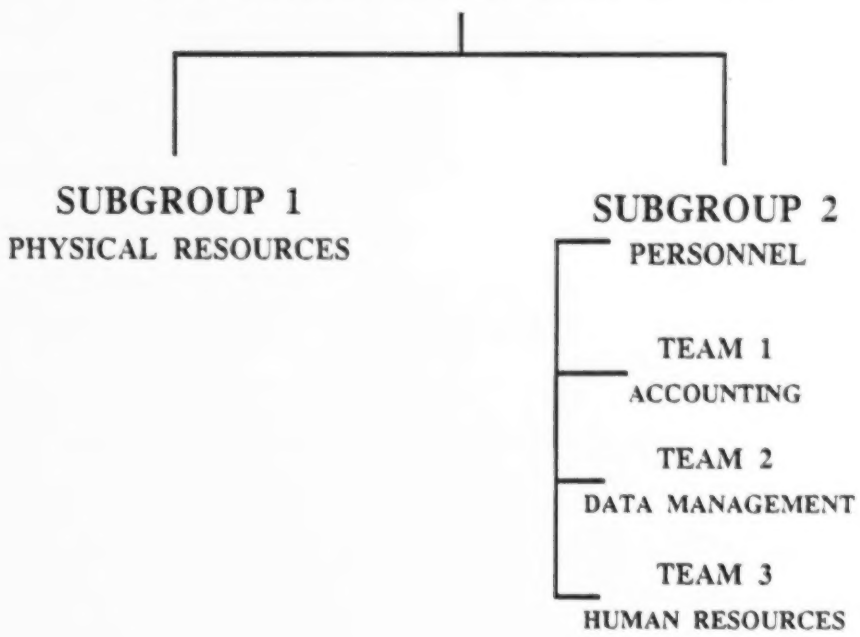

Figure 1. Task Group Structure.

engineers. The role of the resident engineer was to be clearly defined, yet remain general enough to allow decision-making flexibility. This group consisted of 13 people, representing all levels of the organization. The group initially met on 6 separate occasions to begin developing the statement of philosophy. The input of the resident engineers who were members of this task group was the key, providing direction for designing this philosophy. They focused on issues such as how they should balance their engineering and managerial responsibilities, how involved they should be in the local political arena, and to whom were they accountable.

A sub-group of this task group, comprised of 3 members and the evaluator was appointed to draft a philosophy statement based on the results of the first 6 meetings. This effort took place over a 2-month period. The resulting draft was then presented to the entire task group for review and further revision. Modifications were made based on this review, the agency's Commissioner further revised the document and distributed it to the 45 resident engineers in conjunctions with the following three questions regarding the document:

1. Do you understand the philosophy?
2. Are you in general agreement with the principles and concepts it contains?
3. Does this philosophy provide the direction and guidance needed for the office of resident engineer?

Approximately half of the resident engineers who responded to these questions indicated that they were in total agreement with the statement of philosophy.

The resident engineers' comments indicated that this statement will serve to provide direction in resolving the conflict between their roles as engineers and as managers and to create a sense of identity for the organization as a whole. The tenor of the responses can best be illustrated by the following quote:

> I believe the philosophy documents what we all believed to be true but never really saw in writing . . . I believe the document will provide a very important base for creating of the new Resident Engineer, that is, the groundwork for establishing what qualities and abilities a Resident Engineer must possess to meet the needs of the Department.

Because of the positive reception of this philosophy statement for the resident engineers, the Commissioner has since appointed a separate task group to replicate this reiterative process in developing a similar document for district administrators.

TASK GROUP 2

The charge of the second task group was to develop a curriculum for mangement training for resident engineers and their assistants. This curriculum would be written to be consistent with the management philosophy

defined by task group one. This task group is chaired by an Assistant Commissioner and is comprised of district and division administrators, training officers, a resident engineer, and two consultants. During the interim period while waiting for the philosophy statement, this group has conducted a survey to determine what knowledge, skills, and abilities are considered important in operating a residency.

From the results of this survey, it was determined that a resident engineer must effectively deal with a complex array of tasks on a daily basis, ranging from managing personnel policies and procedures to administering large construction projects. Utilizing these results and the final philosophy statement, the task group will continue to outline the management curriculum objectives and refine the strategies required for effective and efficient management of the residency organization. It is expected that the training curriculum will be developed by early spring of 1990.

TASK GROUP 3

The third group was to ensure that resources for critical management support functions and a workable physical environment are available for each residency. The task group consisted of the agency's Director of Finance, Director of Planning, an Assistant Commissioner, division and district administrators, and resident engineers. The group is working on identifying the broad range of resources that resident engineers need to accomplish the tasks within eight functional areas that all residencies share. This task group is divided into two subgroups: one to evaluate the physical environmental needs, another to evaluate the resource needs for critical management support functions (see Figure 1).

PHYSICAL RESOURCES SUBGROUP

The physical resources subgroup surveyed the resident engineers to identify the individual residency's physical needs. They obtained copies of blueprints, pictures of the administrative facilities, requests for additions, and data regarding building accessibility. This data was aggregated and prioritized by need.

District administrators were asked to reviev the priority list, and rank priorities within their respective districts. In addition to forming the final prioritization and recommendations for improvement, this subgroup is also considering the funding of these residency improvements. Two recommendations under consideration are to incorporate these improvements and priorities into the existing capital expenditure program over the next six-year period and to continue to explore alternative funding sources.

PERSONNEL SUBGROUP

The subgroup addressing personnel needs has been divided into three smaller teams to examine each residency's needs in the programmatic areas of accounting, data management, and human resources. Each team developed a methodology framing their area of responsibility, and the methodologies were presented to the entire task group for feedback.

ACCOUNTING TEAM

To evaluate accounting needs, a team consisting of a central office accountant and a resident engineer conducted a task analysis of the accounting functions in nine residencies. This analysis included a description of the necessary skills required at the residency level and the number of work hours devoted to particular tasks. The accounting team's recommendations highlight the need for accounting personnel at the

residency level, for further automation of the accounting tasks, for revision of report formats, and for eliminating duplication of effort in order that more time will be available for management responsibilities. The recommendations of this team have served to confirm the findings of the original residency study.

DATA MANAGEMENT TEAM

The team revieving data management needs is comprised of a division administrator, district administrator, central office managers, and information system personnel. This team has surveyed five residencies to identify the types of data collected and the data entry formats used by the residencies. The team is also identifying specific data management needs that exist at the residency level. From this information, the team will identify duplications of effort, design additional training programs, and determine additional hardware on software needs of the residencies.

HUMAN RESOURCE TEAM

The human resource team has recently begun its investigation into the activities related to personnel management in the residencies. It is anticipated that their efforts will parallel the approach used by the accounting team in conducting a task analysis. Through a series of in-depth interviews and document reviews conducted in six residencies, the team will record the amounts of time spent on particular tasks and the work patterns of persons responsible for these tasks. The aims of the investigation will be to reduce unnecessary paperwork, avoid duplication of effort, insure adequate training for existing staff, and determine an appropriate level of staffing for personnel activities.

SUMMARY

Clearly, there has been considerable overlap among the areas being considered by the three task groups. The development of the philosophy of management, for example, will influence the direction of the management training program. Cooperation is desirable in an environment in which priorities must be set in the context of competition for limited resources. Communication among each of the task groups has been and continues to be crucial to the successful implementation of the original three recommendations. The task groups' work has served to further enhance the opportunity for dialogue between the "subcultures" by allowing them to exchange information and increasing their appreciation for each others' points of view, thereby increasing the likelihood of successful implementation of the recommendations. The broad representation of the VDOT staff on the task groups make them uniquely qualified to serve such forums. Given the varied perspectives represented in the task groups and the multiple factors underlying each group's perspective, the formulation of successful strategies must involve all the different parties and take their points of view into consideration.

There are a number of points to be made regarding this study that distinguish it from many evaluations. The Governor's Commission of Transportation for the 21st Century and an increase in the motor fuels tax earmarked for transportation provided direction and impetus for an increase in additional construction. As the VDOT central administration sought to streamline and increase efficiency in the organization through decentralization, the residencies became concerned that the central

administration had lost awareness of their role in the organization and how it had evolved over the years. The launching of the original study at the request of the field component of the organization makes it unique. The endorsement of the study by top level management showed their appreciation of the important position occupied by the residencies in the organization.

Their request to be the subject of the study pointed to a base of support existing at that level of the organization. The support of top level management and the involvement of all levels at all stages of the study added to this base of support. The framing of the recommendations in broad conceptual terms and the forming of the task groups to further develop them stimulated communication within the organization.

Throughout the conduct of the study and the efforts to implement the recommendations, the evaluators made consistent, conscientious efforts to engage all levels of the organization. Consequently, they have been sensitized to the differences that have characterized these levels and the need for further dialogue. The evaluators have continued to be involved with the implementation of the recommendations by working with the task groups.

While this may be more typical of in-house evaluations, which are usually characterized by an on-going involvement between evaluators and stake holders, there are implications for studies conducted in different environments. The awareness gained through the course of this study may be applied to create a climate that will serve to maximize the probability that recommendations for change will be successfully realized.